

# Hepatitis A

## Frequently Asked Questions

*Revised September 2, 2016*



### OVERVIEW

#### What is Hepatitis A?

Hepatitis A is a contagious liver infection caused by the hepatitis A virus (HAV). The disease can range from a mild illness lasting 1 or 2 weeks to a severe illness lasting for several months. HAV is found in the stool of people with hepatitis A infection and is usually spread by eating contaminated food or drinking water and can be spread through close personal/sexual contact. A person who has hepatitis A can easily pass the disease to others within the same household.

#### What is the source of the current hepatitis A outbreak?

After extensive investigation, HDOH investigators determined that the likely source of the outbreak was raw scallops imported from the Philippines by Sea Port Products Corp. The raw frozen scallops were sold to Koha Oriental Foods and True World Foods distributors, and served at Genki Sushi restaurants on Oahu and Kauai. On August 15, 2016, HDOH ordered this product embargoed statewide, and Genki Sushi restaurants were temporarily closed on Oahu and Kauai. Subsequent testing by the US Food & Drug Administration (FDA) confirmed the presence of hepatitis A virus in the product, which has been voluntarily recalled by Sea Port Products Corp.

#### What are the symptoms of hepatitis A infection?

Not everyone has symptoms. If symptoms develop, they can include:

- Fever
- Fatigue
- Headache and/or body ache
- Loss of appetite
- Nausea
- Stomach pain
- Vomiting
- Diarrhea
- Dark colored urine
- Pale colored stools
- Yellow skin and eyes (Jaundice—may develop several days to a week after other symptoms begin)

Infants and young children with hepatitis A infection tend to have milder or no symptoms and are less likely to develop jaundice than are older children and adults.

Illness usually occurs from two weeks to as long as 50 days after exposure to the hepatitis A virus (i.e., consuming the contaminated product).

Persons should seek medical attention immediately should they develop symptoms.

I have been notified that I am a contact of a case. Should I get tested or restrict my activities?

A contact of a case is defined as:

- All unvaccinated household members
- All unvaccinated sexual contacts
- Anyone sharing illicit drugs with a case
- Anyone sharing food or eating or drinking utensils with a case
- Anyone consuming ready-to-eat foods prepared by an infectious food handler

Recommendations for contacts of cases:

1. Contact your healthcare provider about the possibility of receiving hepatitis A vaccine or immune globulin (IG), which may provide some protection against the disease, if administered within two weeks after exposure
2. Monitor your health for symptoms of hepatitis A infection up to 50 days after exposure
3. Wash your hands with soap and warm water frequently and thoroughly, especially after using the bathroom and before preparing food
4. If symptoms of hepatitis A infection develop, stay at home and contact your healthcare provider immediately

Contacts of cases who are not ill may continue their regular activities (work, school, and social) without restriction.

Testing of individuals who do not have symptoms of hepatitis A is not recommended, with the exception of food handlers (persons who directly prepare, serve, or handle food) in the food service industry. Hawaii State law requires contacts of cases, if not vaccinated prior to exposure, to be tested and have a negative hepatitis A IgM test before returning to work. If you are a food handler, contact your healthcare provider to request this test or, if applicable, provide documentation to your employer of your hepatitis A vaccinations administered prior to exposure. Note: Hepatitis A vaccine or IG, if indicated, should be administered after results of the testing are received.

Do I need to be tested for hepatitis A?

People who have not shown symptoms of hepatitis A should not be tested, with the exception of exposed unvaccinated food handlers (see below). Individuals who have been exposed to hepatitis A virus or are concerned that they may have been exposed should monitor their health for symptoms of hepatitis A (fatigue, malaise, abdominal pain, jaundice, cola-colored urine) for the 50 days following their exposure. Individuals who develop these symptoms should seek medical care.

The exception to this recommendation is unvaccinated **food handlers** (i.e., persons who directly prepare, serve, or handle food) who are **contacts of cases (see definition of “contact” below)**.

Such individuals must show a negative result on a hepatitis A IgM test in order to return to work and, like all others with possible exposure to hepatitis A, are encouraged to monitor their health for any symptoms of hepatitis A. Some food handlers with documentation of vaccination before their exposure may not need testing.

However, if any person believes they have been exposed to hepatitis A within the past two weeks, they may protect themselves against disease by getting vaccinated for hepatitis A or receiving immune globulin. All those who were exposed should monitor their health and contact their healthcare provider immediately if they develop symptoms.

HDOH encourages all residents, regardless of exposure, to consider talking to their provider about getting vaccinated for hepatitis A.

#### How long is a person with hepatitis A contagious?

Patients with hepatitis A are most contagious during the 1 to 2 weeks before the symptoms start until at least 1 week after the start of first symptoms.

#### Why did it take so long to identify the contaminated product?

HDOH investigates all reports of hepatitis A infections and has been performing an extensive investigation to determine the source of the infections and prevent further infection. Because of the long incubation period (about two to seven weeks) and the difficulty in precisely recalling every food eaten and where during that period, it can be challenging to pinpoint a source in hepatitis A outbreaks. Through intensive investigation and public support, it is fortunate that HDOH was able to identify a source and remove the product from the Hawaii market.

## **PREVENTION AND TREATMENT**

#### How can I prevent hepatitis A infection?

Hepatitis A infection is a vaccine preventable disease. Fortunately, most children and some adolescents have been vaccinated as part of routine and catch-up childhood vaccination recommendations. However, many adolescents and adults have not been vaccinated and will be susceptible.

Two doses of hepatitis A vaccine are needed for lasting protection. These doses should be given at least 6 months apart. For more information about the hepatitis A vaccine, go to <http://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/hcp/vis/vis-statements/hep-a.pdf>.

#### Who should get vaccinated for hepatitis A?

HDOH encourages Hawaii residents to consider getting vaccinated for hepatitis A, and advises

that they talk to their healthcare provider about hepatitis A if they are interested. Vaccination for hepatitis A is strongly recommended for certain individuals who are especially at risk (see [HERE](#) for a CDC list of groups recommended to be vaccinated for hepatitis A).

If you have already been vaccinated against hepatitis A or have had hepatitis A disease in the past, you should be protected and do not require a booster for protection.

#### Where can I get vaccinated for hepatitis A?

For a list of pharmacies that provide hepatitis A vaccine, go to [http://health.hawaii.gov/docd/files/2013/07/IMM\\_Adult\\_Resource\\_List.pdf](http://health.hawaii.gov/docd/files/2013/07/IMM_Adult_Resource_List.pdf). Hawaii residents are advised that the demand for the vaccine during the outbreak has led to varied supply levels around the state, so it is recommended that they call ahead to assure the vaccine is available at a particular clinic or pharmacy before going there.

#### What is post-exposure prophylaxis or PEP?

Post-exposure prophylaxis or PEP refers to administering hepatitis A vaccine or immune globulin (IG) to try to prevent disease after exposure to hepatitis A virus. PEP should be administered as soon as possible, within two weeks after exposure.

#### Who should get PEP after being exposed to hepatitis A?

Unvaccinated contacts of cases should talk to their healthcare providers about the possibility of receiving hepatitis A vaccine or immune globulin (IG), which may provide some protection against the disease if administered within the first two weeks after exposure.

A contact is defined as:

- All unvaccinated household members
- All unvaccinated sexual contacts
- Anyone sharing illicit drugs with a case
- Anyone sharing food or eating or drinking utensils with a case
- Anyone consuming ready-to-eat foods prepared by an infectious food handler

*Note: A food handler is any person who directly prepares, serves, or handles food.*

#### What is the treatment for hepatitis A infection?

There is no special treatment for persons with hepatitis A infection. Most persons with hepatitis A infection will recover without complications but may require supportive therapy (e.g. fluids orally or, in some cases, given through the vein, medicines to control fever) and close monitoring by their physician. Persons should seek medical attention if they develop symptoms of hepatitis A infection.

Does hepatitis B vaccine provide any protection against hepatitis A?

Hepatitis A, hepatitis B, and hepatitis C are diseases caused by three different viruses. Although each can cause similar symptoms, they have different modes of transmission and can affect the liver differently. There are vaccines to prevent hepatitis A and B; however, there is not one for hepatitis C. Vaccination with hepatitis B vaccine does not provide protection against hepatitis A disease.

Do healthcare workers have to take special precautions to prevent transmission of hepatitis A?

Even in the absence of a hepatitis A outbreak, healthcare facilities are required to follow standard healthcare facility cleaning policies that are sufficient against hepatitis A virus. Strict adherence to standard precautions will prevent the transmission of hepatitis A, so it is important for healthcare facility employees to follow appropriate infection control at all times and use appropriate hygienic practices, including washing hands thoroughly with soap and water, using gloves as appropriate, and adhering to policies ensuring sick employees stay home.

## **OTHER INFORMATION**

Is it safe to travel to Hawaii? Are there any travel advisories regarding hepatitis A?

Oahu and the rest of Hawaii remain safe destinations for visitors and residents, and there are no travel advisories associated with the hepatitis A outbreak. Standards of food safety in Hawaii are as high as in the rest of the United States, and State of Hawaii investigators and health professionals have been working hard to control this outbreak.

All people in Hawaii and elsewhere in the United States should be aware that consuming raw or undercooked shellfish and other seafood (as well as other foods raw or undercooked, such as meat and eggs) may increase their risk of foodborne illness, even when there is no ongoing outbreak of hepatitis A.

How long does hepatitis A virus survive outside the body?

The hepatitis A virus is extremely hardy. It is able to survive the body's highly acidic digestive tract and can live outside the body for months. High temperatures, such as boiling or cooking food or liquids for at least 1 minute at 185°F (85°C), kill the virus, although freezing temperatures do not.

What if I don't have health insurance or a healthcare provider?

For assistance, call Aloha United Way 2-1-1.

Does the Department of Health conduct food safety inspections at restaurants and other food service organizations?

Yes. Food safety inspection reports are available at the DOH Restaurant Inspection website <http://hi.healthinspections.us/hawaii/>.

For more information about hepatitis A, visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Viral Hepatitis – Hepatitis A website at <http://www.cdc.gov/hepatitis/hav/afaq.htm#overview>.

Healthcare providers with questions regarding recommendations for hepatitis A prophylaxis and testing should call the Hawaii Department of Health Immunization Branch at 586-8300 (Oahu), 1-800-933-4832 (Neighbor islands).